

Nothing new & terrible in this

Prisoner of Silence

Twenty-one years on, James Earl Ray remains evasive about his alleged involvement in the assassination of Martin Luther King. JOHN EDGINTON tries to untangle the evidence.

Before our first meeting, a lawyer warned me that Ray had sounded inarticulate and paranoid on the telephone a couple of days before. So it was with my expectations lowered that I made the journey 40 miles west of Knoxville, deep into the wooded hill district of East Tennessee—an area of broken-down farm buildings and disused coal mines—to meet the man the popular press love to call 'America's most notorious killer', James Earl Ray.

When finally, after introductions and security checks, I found myself alone in a small room and this slight, polite figure sidled in and introduced himself, I became intrigued that my expectations were being so confounded. Quick-witted, knowledgeable, certainly articulate—albeit masked by his clipped Southern accent. How could it be that this apparently gentle guy—not difficult to like—could have blown away the side of Dr Martin Luther King's head with a bullet from a high-powered rifle 21 years ago?

Was I meeting a reformed Ray, mellowed by years of prison? Or was it conceivable that there was at least some element of truth in the story he has been telling ever since his capture and that he was now retelling yet again for my benefit? That he did not kill Martin Luther King. That he was framed for the murder by a mysterious man called Raoul. That he was pressurised into pleading guilty by his attorney, who did a deal with the prosecution.

The second time I met Ray was several months later, at the end of May this year. He looked ill, seemed nervous, uncertain and tense and left me worried about his ability to handle the imminent filming of an interview with him. This was an off-form Ray that a tough prosecutor could certainly have made mincemeat of in cross-examination. Yet, only nine days later, Ray was brought up from his cell to face the camera, looking fit and confident and, with considerable skill, proceeded to rattle through five ten-minute rolls of film in the hour allotted to us.

Over those three visits I had caught a

glimpse of why James Earl Ray has managed to confound so many investigators over the years. On the surface he appears easy to read, but he is actually a much more complex and puzzling character. Only if you take that complexity fully into account is it possible to find the key to his role in the assassination and understand why he still feels unable to talk about what really happened.

Ray's entire strategy since the trial in 1969 has been to seek a retrial on the grounds that he is completely innocent. And to this end he has bombarded the federal and state authorities with letters trying to wrest from them classified information about his case. Despite plenty of official stonewalling, he has had some success in prising documents from the FBI and other sources under the Freedom of Information Act—a fraction of the 185 cubic feet of files relating to the King case which has been locked up for 20 years.

Ray says that if he could get into court in front of a jury, he thinks he now has enough evidence to cast doubt on the state's case 'and to prove a massive fraud to get me to plead guilty and locked away for 99 years without a fair trial'. He is certainly right that he could demonstrate the remarkable weakness of the state's case against him. As our film for *Inside Story* shows, there is no ballistics evidence of any value connecting the rifle that was found in the street after the shooting with the bullet taken from Dr King's body—the FBI failed to testfire the weapon.

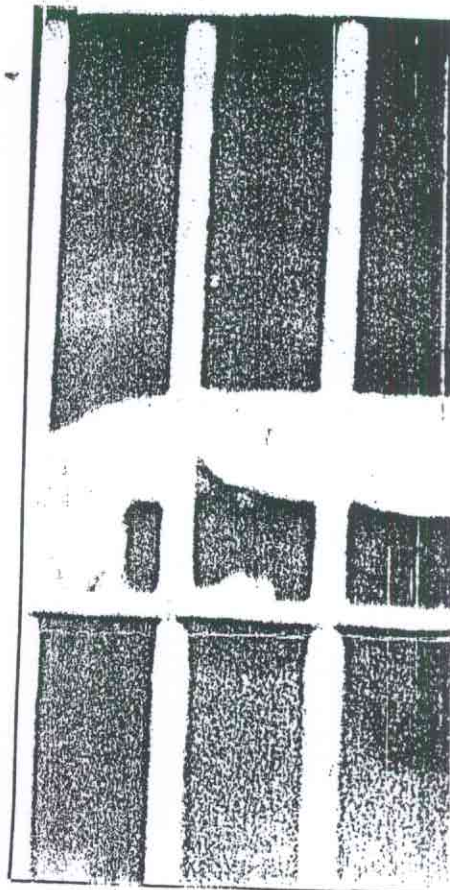
Neither is there any really hard evidence of where the shot was fired from. Dr. King was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis when he was shot. The state said the gun was fired from a bathroom window of a rooming-house 200 feet away. The police removed a section of the bathroom window-sill because it had a mark on it, caused, they claimed, by the barrel of a rifle—thus proving that the rifle was fired from there. Of course, that is evidence that was never tested in court, but Herbert MacDonell, a highly respected ballistics expert, has examined

the mark and is adamant that it was not made by a rifle barrel.

The only person that the state claimed could identify Ray as the man who left the rooming-house after the shooting was a man called Charles Stephens who had been arrested 200 times for drunkenness. FBI documents show that, in two separate interviews in the week of the killing, Stephens said he saw the suspect only from behind. Stephens had an agreement with an attorney to split the \$185,000 reward money offered to the person whose evidence contributed most to the killer being brought to justice. It should not be too difficult to persuade a jury of Stephens' total lack of credibility as a witness and that his motive in coming forward was 'loot for testimony'.

Given the recent revelations about the possibility of a number of gunmen involved in the Kennedy assassination, a jury would now be more likely to consider seriously the evidence of some witnesses who saw a man in the bushes behind the Lorraine Motel who may have been a gunman. The most credible of these has never been interviewed by the police or the FBI about what he saw.

In spite of the state prosecutor Phil Canale's intention to bring over 100 people from all over the world to testify at Ray's trial, and the 300 pieces of physical evidence that the state claimed it would produce, Ray's guilty plea must have come as a considerable relief. A two-and-a-half-hour summary—the state's version of the facts—at a hastily convened hearing that many of the world's media were unable to get to in time, ended with a 99-year sentence for Ray, the flakiness of the case against him unexposed. Editorial writers hundreds of miles away could rage at the





Ray did not 'drop out' of the CIA

DAVID BAKER

aborted trial—the *New York Times* called it 'a shocking breach of faith with the American people'—but the city of Memphis felt they, in the judge's words, 'hadn't done too badly for a "decadent river town"'.
 Why did Ray plead guilty? First, he claims he was disoriented by being kept in solitary confinement for seven months in a cell with a light on 24 hours a day, watched by a TV camera and two guards permanently on duty. He says that after two months of 'sleepless confinement' he began to have recurrent nosebleeds. (The 1978 select committee on assassinations found 'a total disregard for Ray's right to privacy during his trial defence'.)

Secondly, he was placed under enormous pressure from his lawyer to plead guilty to save himself from the electric chair, on the grounds that Ray could not expect a fair trial because the news media had already convicted him through pre-trial publicity. (Even before Ray was captured, *Life* magazine published a cover story—'The Accused Killer. The revealing story of a mean kid'—about Ray as a child.) Percy Foreman, Ray's lawyer, appears to have been solely motivated by the fees he could obtain from the book rights to Ray's story. Foreman signed a contract with the author William Bradford Huie in which Foreman was to receive \$165,000.

It subsequently emerged that this payment was contingent upon Ray pleading guilty, because a secret contract between Huie and his publisher stipulated that the money was not to be used to assist Ray in his trial—only a guilty plea could prevent that. When Ray asked Foreman for \$500 of this money to pay for another lawyer, Foreman made him sign a letter—he still has it—which said 'this ad-

James Earl Ray: face in the frame

vance is also contingent upon the plea of guilty and sentencing going through on 10 March 1969, without any unseemly conduct on your part in court'.

Ray first heard about the guilty plea idea from Percy Foreman in mid-February 1969; years later it emerged from the prosecutor's notes that the prosecution and the defence were negotiating a guilty plea deal as early as 18 December 1968. To compound the injustice, this was the day of the appointment of a lawyer called Hugh Stanton Sr to assist with Ray's defence. Stanton had also acted for the state's chief witness against Ray, Charles Stephens. And it was Stanton who apparently set the ball rolling on the guilty plea. Ray eventually caved in to Foreman's pressure on 9 March, the day before the trial.

So is Ray just an innocent victim—victim of a frame-up and of subsequent injustice by the state in its desire to see one man nailed for the crime? During the course of our investigation, we came to believe that it is much more complicated than that, for there can be little doubt now that there was a sophisticated conspiracy and that Ray played a role in it. But we believe that it was most likely a minor role as a manipulable decoy. Ray had no motive for killing Dr King and nobody would hire him as a killer because of his lack of experience with a rifle and his history of bungling criminality. But as an escaped prisoner, with 17 years of his sentence still to run, Ray was certainly controllable.

He describes a man called Raoul instructing him to move from city to city, carry packages across frontiers, buy a rifle, bring it to Mem-

phis and ask no questions. In 1978, the Congressional committee on assassinations concluded that, although there was an element of truth in Ray's story—his spending patterns were consistent with the amounts he listed as payments from Raoul—Raoul was a fiction. Ray had never been able to produce a shred of evidence to prove the existence of Raoul.

We have discovered from a former CIA man that there was a CIA 'asset' who was an identities specialist in Montreal in 1967 and that his name was Raoul. It was in Montreal in July 1967 that Ray started using the first of a number of identities that he adopted over the next year—they were all residents of one small area of Toronto, they all looked quite like Ray, and one man, Eric Galt, had an uncanny likeness, with scars in the same places as Ray. There is clearly no way that Ray, with no knowledge of Toronto, could have obtained these identities without help. Given this specialist's name was Raoul and that Ray claims he first met this Raoul in Montreal in July 1967, it seems most probable that they were one and the same man.

In addition, a man long regarded as a shadowy figure in the assassination, but never provenly linked—Jules Ricco Kimble—has confessed to us that he assisted Ray by taking him to an identities specialist in Montreal operating from a 'CIA front'. He claims he was acting on instructions from an FBI agent. This probability is compounded by the circumstantial evidence we have built up of the CIA and FBI's likely complicity in the affair in a sophisticated operation that may have combined with elements of the Mafia as well.

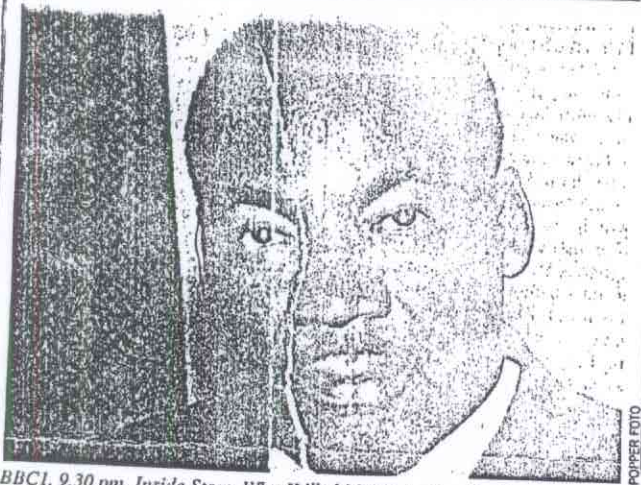
'I really don't recall the Galt name, where I got it and there's a couple of other names I don't recall the details of'—Ray will not talk about where he obtained his identities from. Philip Melanson, the author of the recent book, *The MURKIN Conspiracy*, found Ray's answers to questions on this are in marked contrast to his genial, relaxed approach on safer topics. He saw Ray become evasive, edgy and apparently forgetful, even though he had just demonstrated a detailed remembrance of names and dates on something else.

Ray may well have been out of his depth in a sophisticated conspiracy in which he wittingly or unwittingly agreed to lay a false trail. He is now boxed in by what he knows, unable to reveal what really happened because, as Melanson says, 'it makes him look less innocent than he wants to claim to be. Once he admits that Raoul was an identities specialist, then he has to start answering questions that go to the heart of what happened in Memphis that day. Ray may have used the name taken from his Montreal contact, Raoul, as a convenience to cover the identities of others who helped him later.

Ray probably knows very little about the federal intelligence dimension to this affair, but if he would come clean it could provide more clues. Ray lives by the criminal code, let us hope that the revelations in our film will help him to decide at long last to 'grass'.

John Edginton wrote, produced and directed 'Inside Story: Who Killed Martin Luther King?' (an Otmoor production for BBC tv) shown on Wednesday 27 September (BBC1). The author wishes to acknowledge John Sergeant's contribution with research.

TV HIGHLIGHTS

BBC1, 9.30 pm, *Inside Story: Who Killed Martin Luther King?***Inside Story: Who Killed Martin Luther King?**

BBC1: 9.30 - 10.35 pm

This painstakingly researched John Edginton film might be described as the standard 1980s documentary about the assassination of liberal leaders in the United States of the 1960s. The official line on the Kennedy killings, as well as the King murder, was that they were down to lone nutters. Television documentaries show, convincingly or otherwise, that there was a conspiracy leading back to Washington. In the King case the supposed killer James Earl Ray is still in jail and willing to protest to any passing television investigator that he did not pull the trigger. The case for conspiracy now looks unanswerable. Ceefax.

INDEPENDENT 23 SEPT '89

WEDNESDAY INDEPENDENT

Inside Story (9.30 BBC1) has a bad attack of conspiracy theory as it trawls for the answer to who killed Martin Luther King. James Earl Ray, convicted in 1969, muddies the water in a prison interview and a host of shadowy

Mafia men and CIA freelancers let slip more than their paymasters might wish about security service involvement.

OBSERVER 24 SEPT '89

9.30-10.35 Inside Story (BBC1): 'Who Killed Martin Luther King?' A small-time crook called James Earl Ray was the man arrested, though to this day he protests his innocence. The story is complicated, involving a New Orleans connection with the Kennedy assassination and the false identities borrowed by Ray from look-alikes, who (conspiracy theorists claim) must have been found for him by some sort of organisation... like the CIA.



© James Earl Ray: a pawn in someone else's game? (BBC1, 9.30pm)

Inside Story

9.30-10.35pm BBC1

Doubts about the identity of the assassin of John F. Kennedy have also led to questions about the killing of Martin Luther King, for which James Earl Ray is serving a 99-year sentence. Paul Hamann's film claims to have found "key witnesses", plus evidence of "startling new allegations" involving a "conspiracy" on the part of the CIA and FBI. One such witness includes Ray himself, a man whose previous criminal record consisted only of driving offences and small-time robberies. Another is a fireman who watched the whole incident and claims the logistics and ballistics rendered Ray's offence impossible. Also called to testify are a man called Raoul, who admits he was part of the assassination plan, and a witness whom the Memphis authorities kept in protective custody at the time, but who was apparently too drunk to identify anybody that day. It is a fascinating film.

SUNDAY CORRESPONDENT 24 SEPT '89

Inside Story

BBC1, 9.30pm

James Earl Ray — another convenient "lone-nut" assassination suspect — was convicted of shooting Martin Luther King in 1969, after a trial lasting just two-and-a-half hours. This complex but logically argued and important film shows that the verdict reached was questionable at the very least, suggests that a conspiracy involving Government agents was at work and ringingly calls for the re-opening of the case. Ray was almost certainly implicated but it seems unlikely that he actually pulled the trigger. There are many pertinent questions posed: who,

for example, gave the mysterious order to call off King's Memphis Police protection only hours before his murder?

TELEVISION
Thomas Sutcliffe

Luther King and I

"I WOULD say I was the only one who saw him shot, from the front." The voice belonged to a fireman who had been watching the upper balcony of the Lorraine Motel on 4 April 1968 when Martin Luther King was hit by an assassin's bullet. What he described seeing was less significant than the faint tone of self-aggrandisement in his testimony, the sense of a bystander pressing through a crowd to stake a claim in the historical record.

As the rash of Kennedy documentaries last year showed, all conspiracy investigations have to pick their way through a mob of bar-fies, small-time criminals, d'relicts and winos, all queuing for their 15 minutes of fame. And in this respect *Inside Story's* "Who Killed Martin Luther King" (BBC 1) was no exception — a cab-driver speaking through an electronic throat vibrator, a dying ex-mobster who claimed the FBI had put out the contract on King, a Mafia "mechanic" who recalled taking James Earl Ray to Montreal to pick up a set of aliases from a CIA safe-house and James Earl Ray himself — all came forward to tell brief stories in which they were the central character. As their evidence was more a collage than a chain of logic it wasn't really essential that you believed all of them.

John Edginton's film clearly did, though, spending its first half hour picking away at the convenient labels pasted over the King's assassination by the two-and-a-half-hour trial. Why had the seven man bodyguard been withdrawn 24 hours before King died? ... Why were three tactical squads pulled back that morning? ... Why were the police preoccupied with a false assassination threat against a black Memphis policeman on surveillance duty at the Lorraine Motel? ... Why was one of the first people to reach King's body an intelligence agent with CIA contacts? ... why had the FBI allowed no ballistic tests on the bullet and rifle? It was the questions themselves that constituted evidence for conspiracy rather than any answers supplied by the programme; these were cracks in the tooth that the tongue can't leave alone.

9.30 **INSIDE STORY: Who Killed Martin Luther King?** A re-investigation of the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, complete with fresh testimony which (unsurprisingly enough) casts doubt on the conviction of James Earl Ray. Splendid entertainment for those conspiracy theorists among you (see *Briefing*).

If the TV Investigators have got it right, clandestine Washington figures should really be taking the blame for the Kennedy assassinations rather than the improbable fall-guys who were offered up for official purposes. Those who love a good conspiracy theory will be only too ready to swallow the *INSIDE STORY* (9.30 BBC) suggestion that yet another celebrated American liberal hero, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, was in fact done down by the combined efforts of the CIA, FBI and US military intelligence. James

Whodunnit and why?

Earl Ray, serving time in Tennessee for the 1968 murder, obliged with an innocence-protesting prison interview — a claim more than borne out by common sense (bumping petty thief Ray was no marksman and yet was supposed to have succeeded with only a single long-range shot). The belated surfacing of a host of shady CIA "mechanics" and freelance low-lifers also add credence to the overwhelming suspicion that

And, while it didn't pin down a case against any one agency, and occasionally appeared naïve about the motives of its speakers, the film reminded you that America in the Sixties was a world where moral hysteria was a good career decision and government agencies could soberly discuss the practicality of poisoning Castro's cigars. King had come out against the Vietnam war shortly before he was killed, and his arrival to support striking garbage workers in Memphis had raised tensions further. He was also under constant surveillance by the FBI. In this climate James Earl Ray's handy package of aliases from a Canadian suburb (all bearing a resemblance to him) and his consistent stories of being set up by a contact called Raoul begin to look more plausible. But their best coup came too late; as the film ended a caption rolled — "After completing this film we found a CIA man who confirmed that the CIA ran false identities out of Montreal... his name was Raoul Miori."

In the midst of all this professional suspicion, though, one question was conspicuous by its absence. If a deadly consortium of the CIA, the Mafia and the FBI really conspired to kill King and to turn James Earl Ray into the perfect scapegoat, planting his gun in a nearby doorway and re-leasing his description as the killer, why is he still alive, a loose cannon who, even 25 years later, might just sink the ship?



James Earl Ray: wrongly convicted of murdering Martin Luther King?

How did they manage to avoid the cops and square Richmond?

no follow up was a plain Memphis policeman

fake